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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS USG-FUNDED COUNTERNARCOTICS TASK FORCE IN  
LANG SON PROVINCE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a July 7 visit to Lang Son Province, the Ambassador received a briefing on USG-funded, UNODC-administered counternarcotics efforts in the region. Since the inception of this effort, coordination has improved among local, regional and cross-border security officials, and a number of significant drug rings have been broken up. The primary drug passing through and being consumed in Lang Son is heroin. The Lang Son Task Force Unit's director agreed in principle to a future visit from DEA, which would be a first if it comes off. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On July 7, the Ambassador met with Ta Quang Vu, the Director of the Son La Joint Counternarcotics Task Force Unit (TFU) established under the UNODC G-55 counternarcotics program (which receives USG funding). Vu explained that he is also the head of the provincial counternarcotics department in the Department of Public Security. Additionally, the TFU includes members of the Department of Border Security and the Customs Department. The TFU currently has ten officers: six members come from the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), two members represent the Border Army and two participate on behalf of the Customs Department.

¶3. (SBU) Vu noted that the TFU was founded in September 2005. Since that time, officers associated with the unit have attended 800 training sessions. (Note: The actual number of officers attending training is likely much smaller. The number refers to the total sessions attended counted by officer, though most officers attended multiple sessions and thus were counted many times. End Note.) Since its founding, the unit has investigated 200 cases and seized 12.5 kilograms of heroin (a three-fold increase from the amounts seized in a similar period before the program's inception). Also the number of known drug addicts in the province has declined from 2,000 individuals in 1997 to 1,149 as habitual users of opium have given up the drug. Heroin imported from the "Golden Triangle" remains the drug of choice in the province, Vu added. He also noted that there is an "06" Center in Lang Son to rehabilitate drug addicts, with over one hundred addicts in treatment. About 40 percent of these are HIV positive.

¶4. (SBU) Vu stated that new equipment provided under the UNODC's project, including a car, motorbikes, radios, cameras and testing chemicals, has also helped officers conduct investigations. The TFU has improved cooperation between different departments and has also helped arrange regional meetings to share information on drug crimes. The TFU also formally meets once a year with local security officials from Guangxi, the Chinese province that borders Lang Son. In addition they have frequent informal meetings at the border crossing and a hotline channel between offices to facilitate investigations. The TFU's main successes to date were the coordinated break-up of several criminal gangs involving 260 suspects operating out of Bac Giang, Thai Nguyen and Hanoi. Vu estimated that the TFU arrests approximately 100 suspects a year.

15. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that effective law enforcement and drug interdiction are in the interests of both the United States and Vietnam. Lang Son, with its long border and excellent highway to Hanoi, is clearly on the frontlines in the fight against narcotics trafficking. This is a problem that requires joint action because it threatens everyone. We are glad to see that USG funding has been well spent on TFUs like this one, the Ambassador emphasized. He also reiterated DEA's request to visit the Lang Son TFU: to date, the Ministry of Public Security has refused to allow Embassy's DEA Country Office representatives to visit any TFUs. Vu stated that his team would be glad to accept such a visit, an opening DEA intends to exploit.

MARINE